PHILIP STEELE

of the ROYAL NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE

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(5)

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER I.—Philip Steele, son of a Chicago millionaire, lover of adventure and outdoor life, enlists at Regina in the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police. In his cabin station far up in the north he gets orders to go to the Hudson Bay Company post at Lac Bain, to join Bucky Nome, a fellow police officer.

CHAPTER II.—On Steele's arrival at Lac Bain the company's factor there, Breed, orders him to go on to Fort Churchill, on Hudson's Bay, to meet and assist Col. Becker, a high official in the company's service, who is on his way to visit the Lac Bain post on a tour of investigation. He finds the colonel, and with him unexpectedly, Isobel Becker. The fondness between them convinces Steele they are husband and wife.

CHAPTER III.—Arriving at Lac Bain, Steele finds Bucky Nome there. Nome, although in reality a desperado, has a captivating way with women. He makes love to Mrs. Becker after supper at Breed's, much to the indignation of Steele, who knows him well. When Steele and Nome return to their cabin at the post Steele angers Nome by charging him with murder, and with having designs on Mrs. Becker. Steele orders Nome to quit the service and the country, to become what he knows he will be, an outlaw. Nome leaves, with threats of ultimate vengeance. Then, later, Steele shoulders his pack and he, too, quits Lac Bain.

CHAPTER IV.—Steele visits the cabin of Jacque Pierrot, a half breed, with the idea of getting him as a companion on his patrol instead of Nome. There he is shown a silken scarf given by Mrs. Becker at Churchill to Jacque's sick wife, and the well-known odor of hyacinth clinging to it revives all his affection for Mrs. Becker.

CHAPTER V.—Inspector MacGregor summons Steele to Prince Albert and sends him on a dangerous mision to Wekusko to bring back a man named Thorpe, who had attempted to murder Chief Constructor Hodges.

CHAPTER VI.—Steele is kidnapped at Wekusko, through the decoy of a beautiful woman, bucked and gagged and nailed up tight in a box, which is carried to the woman's cabin. This woman is the wife of Thorpe.

CHAPTER VII.—While imprisoned in the box in the Thorpe home, Hodges visits the place and makes fruitless overtures to Mrs. Thorpe, which Steele overhears. Mrs. Thorpe bitterly berates Hodges for ruining her husband and pursuing her, and in her hate she kills him when he assaults her. Mrs. Thorpe then releases Steele, who now knows the entire story of the wicked conspiracy against Thorpe. He in turn releases Thorpe from prison and sends him and his wife to Chicago, giving them a check for $1,000 with which to begin life over again.

CHAPTER VIII.—Back in MacGregor's office again, Steele gets a letter by which he learns for the first time that Isobel Becker is the daughter and not the young wife of Col. Becker.

CHAPTER IX.

Philip Takes Up the Trail.

THE letter—the flowers—that one shining golden hair, wound in a glistening thread about their shriveled stems, seemed for a short space to lift Philip Steele from out of the world he was in, to another in which his mind was only vaguely conscious, stunned by this letter that had come with the unexpectedness of a thunderbolt to change, in a single instant, every current of life in his body.

For a few moments he made no effort to grasp the individual significance of the letter, the flowers, the golden hair. One thought filled his brain—one great, overpowering truth, which excluded everything else—and this was the realization that the woman he loved was not Colonel Becker's wife. She was free. And for him—Philip Steele—there was hope——hope— Suddenly it dawned upon him what the flowers meant. The colonel had written the letter, and Isobel had sent the faded violets, with their golden thread. It was her message to him—a message without words, and yet with a deeper meaning for him than words could have expressed. In a flood there rushed back upon him all the old visions which he had fought against, and he saw her again in the glow of the camp-fire, and on the trail, glorious in her beauty, his ideal of all that a woman should be.

He rose to his feet and locked his door, fearing that some one might enter. He wanted to be alone, to realize fully what had happened, to regain control of his emotions. If Isobel Becker had merely written him a line or two, a note exculpating herself of what her father had already explained away, he would still have thought that a world lay between them. But, in place of that, she had sent him the faded flowers, with their golden thread!

For many minutes he paced back and forth across his narrow room, and never had a room looked more like a prison cell to him than this one did now. He was filled with but one impulse, and that was to return to Lac Bain, to humble himself at the feet of the woman he loved, and ask her forgiveness for the heinous thing he had done. He wanted to tell her that he had driven Bucky Nome into outlawry, that he had fought for her, and run away himself—because he loved her.

It was Sergeant Moody's voice, vibrant with the rasping unpleasantness of a file, that jarred him back into his practical self. He thrust the letter and the flowers into his breast pocket and opened the door.

Moody came in and said:

"I just came in to tell you the news. They've got track of DeBar again, up near Lac la Biche."

Philip had heard a great deal about DeBar, the cleverest criminal in all the northland, whom no man or combination of men had been clever enough to catch. And now DeBar was near Lac la Biche, in the Churchill and Lac Bain country. If he could get permission from MacGregor to go after DeBar his own difficulty would be settled in the easiest possible way. The assignment would take him for a long and indefinite time into the north. It would take him back to Isobel Becker.

He went immediately to his room upon reaching the barracks, and wrote out his request to MacGregor. He sent it over to headquarters by a rookie. After that he waited.

Not until the following morning did Moody bring him a summons to appear in MacGregor's office. Five minutes later the inspector greeted him with outstretched hand, gave him a grip that made his fingers snap, and locked the office door. He was holding Philip's communication when the young man entered.

"I don't know what to say to this, Steele," he began, seating himself at his desk and motioning Philip to a chair. "To be frank with you, this proposition of yours is entirely against my best judgment."

"In other words, you haven't sufficient confidence in me," added Philip.

"No, I don't mean that. There isn't a man on the force in whom I have greater confidence than you. But, if I was to gamble, I'd wager ten to one that you'd lose out if I sent you up to take this man DeBar."

"I'll accept that wager—only reverse the odds," said Philip daringly.

The inspector twisted one of his long red mustaches and smiled a little grimly at the other.

"If I were to follow my own judgment I'd not send one man, but two," he went on. "I don't mean to underestimate the value of my men when I say that our friend DeBar, who has evaded us for years, is equal to any two men I've got. I wouldn't care to go after him myself—alone. I'd want another hand with me, and a mighty good one—a man who was cool, cautious, and who knew all of the ins and outs of the game as well as myself. And here—" He interrupted himself, and chuckled audibly, "here you are asking permission to go after him alone! Why, man, it's the very next thing to inviting yourself to commit suicide! Now, if I were to send you, and along with you a good, level-headed man like Moody—"

"I have had enough of double-harness work, unless I am commanded to go, Mr. MacGregor," interrupted Philip. "I realize that DeBar is a dangerous man, but I believe that I can bring him down. Will you give me the opportunity?"

MacGregor laid his cigar on the edge of the desk and leaned across toward his companion, the long white fingers of his big hands clasped in front of him. He always took this position, with a cigar smoldering beside him, when about to say those things which he wished to be indelibly impressed on the memory of his listener.

"Yes, I'm going to give you the opportunity," he said slowly, "and I am also going to give you permission to change your mind after I have told you something about DeBar, whom we know as the Seventh Brother. I repeat that, if you go alone, it's just ten to one that you don't get him. Since '99 four men have gone out after him, and none has come back. There was Forbes, who went in that year; Bannock, who took up the trail in 1902; Fleisham in 1904, and Gresham in 1907. Since the time of Gresham's disappearance we have lost sight of DeBar, and only recently, as you know, have we got trace of him again. He is somewhere up on the edge of the Barren Lands. I have private information which leads me to believe that the factor at Fond du Lac can take you directly to him."

MacGregor unclasped his hands to pick up a worn paper from a small pile on the desk.

"He is the last of seven brothers," he added. "His father was hanged."

"A good beginning," interjected Philip.

"There's just the trouble," said the inspector quickly. "It wasn't a good beginning. This is one of those peculiar cases of outlawry for which the law itself is largely responsible, and I don't know of any one I would say this to but you. The father was hanged, as I have said. Six months later it was discovered, beyond a doubt, that the law had taken the life of an innocent man, and that DeBar had been sent to the gallows by a combination of evidence fabricated entirely by the perjury of enemies. The law should have vindicated itself. But it didn't. Two of those who had plotted against DeBar were arrested, tried—and acquitted, a fact which goes to prove the statement of a certain great man that half of the time law is not justice. There is no need of going into greater detail about the trials and the popular sentiment afterward. In December of '96 DeBar's seven sons took justice into their own hands. In one night they killed the three men chiefly instrumental in sending their father to his death, and fled into the North."

"Good!" exclaimed Philip.

The word shot from him before he had thought. At first he flushed, then sat bolt upright and smiled frankly into the inspector's face as he watched the effect of his indiscretion.

"So many people thought at the time," said MacGregor, eyeing him with curious sharpness. "Especially the women. For that reason the first three who were caught were merely convicted of manslaughter instead of murder. They served their sentences, were given two years each for good behavior, and are somewhere in South America. The fourth killed himself when he was taken near Moose Factory, and the other three went what the law calls 'bad.' Henry, the oldest of them all, killed the officer who was bringing him down from Prince Albert in '99, and was afterward executed. Paul, the sixth, returned to his native town seven years after the hanging of his father and was captured after wounding two of the officers who went in pursuit of him. He is now in an insane asylum."

The inspector paused, and ran his eye over a fresh slip of paper.

"And all this," said Philip in a low voice, "because of a crime committed by the law itself. Five men hung, one a suicide, three in prison and one in an insane asylum—because of a blunder of the law!"

"The king can do no wrong," said MacGregor with gentle irony, "and neither can the law. Remember that, Philip, as long as you are in the service. The law may break up homes, ruin states, set itself a Nemesis on innocent men's heels—but it can do no wrong. It is the Juggernaut before which we all must bow our heads, even you and I, and when by any chance it makes a mistake, it is still law, and unassailable. It is the greatest weapon of the clever and the rich, so it bears a moral. Be clever, or be rich."

"And William DeBar, the seventh brother—" began Philip.

"Is tremendously clever, but not rich," finished the inspector. "He has caused us more trouble than any other man in Canada. He is the youngest of the seven brothers, and you know there are curious superstitions about seventh brothers. In the first pursuit after the private hanging he shot two men. He killed a third in an attempt to save his brother at Moose Factory. Since then, Forbes, Bannock, Fleisham and Gresham have disappeared, and they all went out after him. They were all good men, powerful physically, skilled in the ways of the wilderness, and as brave as tigers. Yet they all failed. And not only that, they lost their lives. Whether DeBar killed them, or led them on to a death for which his hands were not directly responsible, we have never known. The fact remains that they went out after DeBar—and died. I am not superstitious, but I am beginning to think that DeBar is more than a match for any one man. What do you say? Will you go with Moody, or—"

"I'll go alone, with your permission," said Philip.

The inspector's voice at once fell into its formal tone of command.

"Then you may prepare to leave at once," he said. "The factor at Fond du Lac will put you next to your man. Whatever else you require I will give you in writing some time today."

Philip accepted this as signifying that the interview was at an end, and rose from his seat.

That night he added a postscript to the letter which he had written home, saying that for a long time he would not be heard from again. The midnight train was bearing him toward Le Pas.

CHAPTER X.

Isobel's Disappearance.

FOUR hundred miles as an arrow might fly, five hundred by snowshoes and dog-sledge; up the Pelican Lake waterway, straight north along the edge of the Geikie Barrens, and from Wollaston westward, Philip hurried—not toward the hiding place of William DeBar, but toward Lac Bain.

A sledge and six dogs with a half-breed driver took him from Le Pas as far as the Churchill; with two Crees, on snow-shoes, he struck into the Reindeer country, and two weeks later bought a sledge and three dogs at an Indian camp on the Waterfound. On the second day, in the barrens to the west, one of the dogs slit his foot on a piece of ice; on the third day the two remaining dogs went lame, and Philip and his guide struck camp at the headwater of the Gray Beaver, sixty miles from Lac Bain. It was impossible for the dogs to move the following day, so Philip left his Indian to bring them in later and struck out alone.

That day he traveled nearly thirty miles, over a country broken by timbered ridges, and toward evening came to the beginning of the open country that lay between him and the forests about Lac Bain. It had been a hard day's travel, but he did not feel exhausted. The full moon was rising at nine o'clock, and Philip rested for two hours, cooking and eating his supper, and then resumed his journey, determined to make sufficient progress before camping to enable him to reach the post by the following noon. It was midnight when he put up his light tent, built a fire, and went to sleep. He was up again at dawn. At two o'clock he came into the clearing about Lac Bain. As he hurried to Breed's quarters he wondered if Colonel Becker or Isobel had seen him from their window. He had noticed that the curtain was up, and a thin spiral of smoke rising from the clay chimney that descended to the fireplace in their room.

He found Breed, the factor, poring over one of the ledgers which he and Colonel Becker had examined. He started to his feet when he saw Philip.

"Where in the name of blazes have you been?" were his first words, as he held out a hand. "I've been hunting the country over for you, and had about come to the conclusion that you and Bucky Nome were dead."

"Hunting for me," said Philip. "What for?"

Breed shrugged his shoulders.

"The colonel an'—Miss Isobel," he said. "They wanted to see you so bad that I had men out for three days after you'd gone looking for you. Couldn't even find your trail. I'm curious to know what was up."

Philip laughed. He felt a tingling joy running through every vein in his body. It was difficult for him to repress the trembling eagerness in his voice as he said:

"Well, I'm here. I wonder if they want to see me—now."

"Suppose they do," replied Breed, slowly lighting his pipe. "But you've hung off too long. They're gone."

"Gone?" Philip stared at the factor.

"Gone?" he demanded again.

"Left this morning—for Churchill," affirmed Breed. "Two sledges, two Indians, the colonel and Miss Isobel."

For a few moments Philip stood in silence, staring straight out through the one window of the room with his back to the factor.

"Did they leave any word for me?" he asked.

"No."

"Then—I must follow them!"

He spoke the words more to himself than to Breed. The factor regarded him in undisguised astonishment and Philip, turning toward him, hastened to add.

"I can't tell you why, Breed—but it's necessary that I overtake them as soon as possible. I don't want to lose a day—not an hour. Can you lend me a team and a driver?"

"I've got a scrub team," said Breed, "but there isn't another man that I can spare from the post. There's LeCroix, ten miles to the west. If you can wait until tomorrow—"

"I must follow this afternoon—now," interrupted Philip. "They will have left a clean trail behind, and I can overtake them some time tomorrow. Will you have the team made ready for me—a light sledge, if you've got it."

By three o'clock he was on the trail again. Breed had spoken truthfully when he said his dogs were scrubs. There were four of them, two mongrels, one blind huskie, and a mamelute that ran lame. And, besides this handicap, Philip found that his own endurance was fast reaching the ebbing point. He had traveled sixty miles in a day and a half, and his legs and back began to show signs of the strain. In spite of this fact, his spirits rose with every mile he placed behind him. He knew that it would be impossible for Isobel and her father to stand the hardship of fast and continued travel. At the most they would not make more than twenty miles in a day, and even with his scrub team he could make thirty, and would probably overtake them at the end of the next day. Two hours later he came upon the remains of their mid-day camp-fire, nine or ten miles from Lac Bain. It was dark when he reached this point. There were glowing embers still in the fire, and these he stirred into life, adding armfuls of dry wood to the flames. He would camp here—where Isobel had been only a few hours before. If he traveled hard he would overtake them by next noon.

But he had underestimated his own exhaustion. It was nine o'clock next morning before he awoke, and after ten before he again took up the pursuit of the two sledges. The afternoon was half gone before he struck their camp of the preceding evening, and he knew that, because of his own loss of time, Isobel was still as far ahead of him as when he had left Lac Bain. He followed the trail while the moon was at its highest, and then pitched his tent. He was up again next morning and breaking camp before it was light.

Scarcely had he traveled an hour over the clear-cut trail ahead of him when he suddenly halted his dogs with a loud cry of command and astonishment. In a small open the trails of the two sledges separated. One continued straight east, toward Churchill, while the other turned almost at right angles into the south.

For a few moments he could find no explanation for this occurrence. Then he decided that one of the Indians had struck southward, either to hunt, or on some short mission, and that he would join the other sledge farther on. Convinced that this was the right solution, Philip continued over the Churchill trail. A little later, to his despair, it began to snow so heavily that the trail was quickly obliterated. There was but one thing for him to do now, and that was to hasten on to Fort Churchill, giving up all hope of finding Isobel and the colonel before he met them there.

Four days later he came into the post. The news that awaited him struck him dumb. Isobel and her father, with one Indian had gone with the sledge into the South. The Indian who had driven on to Churchill could give no further information, except that he knew the colonel and his daughter had suddenly changed their minds about coming to Churchill. Perhaps they had gone to Nelson House or York Factory—or even to Le Pas. He did not know.

It was with a heavy heart that Philip turned his face once more toward Lac Bain. He could not repress a laugh, bitter and filled with disappointment, as he thought how fate was playing against him. Isobel and her father were going south. He had little doubt they were striking for Nelson House, and from Nelson House to civilization there was but one trail, that which led to Le Pas and Etomami. And Etomami was but two hours by rail from Prince Albert.

He carried in his breast pocket a bit of written information which he had obtained from the Churchill factor—that helped to soften, in a way, the sting of his disappointment. It was Colonel Becker's London address—and Isobel's,—and he quickly laid out for himself new plans of action. He would write to MacGregor from Lac Bain, asking him to put in at once the necessary application for the purchase of his release from the service. As soon as he was free he would go to London. He would call on Isobel like a gentleman, he told himself. Perhaps, after all, it would be the better way.

But first, there was DeBar.

As he had been feverishly anxious to return into the North, so, now, he was anxious to have this affair with DeBar over with. He lost no time at Lac Bain, writing his letter to Inspector MacGregor on the same day that he arrived. Only two of the dogs which the Indian had brought into the post were fit to travel, and with these, and a light sledge on which he packed his equipment he set off alone for Fond du Lac. A week later he reached the post. He found Hutt, the factor, abed with a sprained knee, and the only other man at the post were three Chippewayans, who could neither talk nor understand English.

"DeBar is gone," groaned Hutt, after Philip had made himself known. "A rascal of a Frenchman came in last night on his way to the Grand Rapid, and this morning DeBar was missing. I had the Chippewayans in, and they say he left early in the night with his sledge and one big bull of a hound that he hangs to like grim death. I'd kill that damned Indian you came up with. I believe it was he told the Frenchman there was an officer on the way."

"Is the Frenchman here?" asked Philip.

"Gone!" groaned Hutt again, turning his twisted knee. "He left for the Grand Rapid this morning, and there isn't another dog or sledge at post. This winter has been death on the dogs, and what few are left are out on the trap-lines. DeBar knows you're after him, sure as fate, and he's taken a trail toward the Athabasca. The best I can do is to let you have a Chippewayan who'll go with you as far as the Charlot. That's the end of his territory, and what you'll do after that God only knows."

"I'll take the chance," said Philip. "We'll start after dinner. I've got two dogs, a little lame, but even at that they'll have DeBar's outfit handicapped."

It was less than two hours later when Philip and the Chippewayan set off into the western forests, the Indian ahead and Philip behind, with the dogs and sledge between them. Both men were traveling light. Philip had even strapped his carbine and small emergency bag to the toboggan, and carried only his service revolver at his belt. It was one o'clock and the last slanting beams of the winter sun, heatless and only cheering to the eye, were fast dying away before the first dull gray approach of desolate gloom which precedes for a few hours the northern night.

DeBar was ahead of him—DeBar the outlaw, probably, watching and scheming as he had watched and schemed when the other four had played against him. The game had grown old to him. It had brought him victim after victim, and each victim had made of him a more deadly enemy of the next.

Philip went back to the sledge and unstrapped his carbine. He walked ahead of the Indian, alert, listening and prepared. They built a fire and cooked their supper when it grew too dark to travel.

Later, when it became lighter, they went on hour after hour, through the night. At dawn the trail was still old. There were the same cobwebs of frost, the same signs to show that DeBar and his Mackenzie hound had preceded them a long time before. During the next day and night they spent sixteen hours on their snowshoes and the lacework of frost in DeBar's trail grew thinner. The next day they traveled fourteen and the next twelve, and there was no lacework of frost at all. There were hot coals under the ashes of DeBar's fires. The crumbs of his bannock were soft. The toes of his Mackenzie hound left warm, sharp imprints. It was then that they came to the frozen water of the Charlot. The Chippewayan turned back to Fond du Lac, and Philip went on alone, the two dogs limping behind him with his outfit.

It was still early in the day when Philip crossed the river into the barrens and with each step now his pulse beat faster. DeBar could not be far ahead of him. Very soon he must overtake him. And then—there would be a fight.

At noon he halted and built a small fire between two rocks, over which he boiled some tea and warmed his meat. Each day he had built three fires, but at the end of this day, when darkness stopped him again, it occurred to him that since that morning DeBar had built but one.

Gray dawn had scarcely broken when he again took up the pursuit. It was bitterly cold, and a biting wind swept down across the barrens from the Arctic icebergs.

Day after day he followed the trail of DeBar into the North. The mercury in his thermometer registered 60 degrees below zero. The hunted man was making for a country where lay nothing but peopleless barrens as far as the Great Slave. Philip began to fear DeBar would beat him out in the race. His own weakening legs were giving way. He came at last to the edge of a little lake. Seeking to cross it on the ice he lost his dogs and the sledge and barely got out with his own life. In the keenness of his terrible peril he cried out for help in the hope that even DeBar would hear and come to his aid.

When he struggled back out of the lake to the edge of the broken ice he learned then that he had lost not only his dogs and the sledge, but even his matches. There was no way by which he could warm himself or cook anything to eat. His almost frozen fingers prevented him from using his flint and steel.

"Good God!" he breathed.

He rose slowly, with a long, shuddering breath and turned his eyes to where the outlaw's trail swung from the lake into the North. Even in that moment, as the blood in his veins seemed congealing with the icy chill of death, the irony of the situation was not lost upon Philip.

"It's the law versus God, Billy," he chattered, as if DeBar stood before him. "The law wouldn't vindicate itself back there—ten years ago—but I guess it's doing it now."

He dropped into DeBar's trail and began to trot.

"At least it looks as if you're on the side of the Mighty," he continued. "But we'll see—very soon—Billy—"

Ahead of him the trail ran up a ridge, broken and scattered with rocks and stunted scrub, and the sight of it gave him a little hope. Hope died when he reached the top and stared out over a mile of lifeless barren.

As his legs grew weaker and his blood more sluggish, his mind seemed to work faster, and the multitude of thoughts that surged through his brain made him oblivious of the first gnawing of a strange dull pain. He was freezing. He knew that without feeling pain. He had before him, not hours, but minutes of life, and he knew that, too.

He stopped again on a snow ridge. He had come a quarter of a mile, though it seemed that he had traveled ten times that distance.

"Sixty degrees below zero—and it's the vindication of the law!"

His voice scarcely broke between his purple lips now, and the bitter sweep of wind swayed him as he stood.

CHAPTER XI.

The Law Versus the Man.

SUDDENLY a great thrill shot through Philip, and for an instant he stood rigid. What was that he saw out in the gray gloom of Arctic desolation, creeping up, up, up, almost black at its beginning, and dying away like a ghostly winding-sheet? A gurgling cry rose in his throat, and he went on, panting now like a broken-winded beast in his excitement. It grew near, blacker, warmer. He fancied that he could feel its heat, which was the new fire of life blazing within him.

He went down between two great drifts into a pit which seemed bottomless. He crawled to the top of the second, using his pulseless hands like sticks in the snow, and at the top something rose from the other side of the drift to meet him.

It was a face, a fierce, bearded face, the gaunt starvation in it hidden by his own blindness. It seemed like the face of an ogre, terrible, threatening, and he knew that it was the face of William DeBar, the seventh brother.

He launched himself forward, and the other launched himself forward, and they met in a struggle which was pathetic in its weakness, and rolled together to the bottom of the drift. Yet the struggle was no less terrible because of that weakness. It was a struggle between two lingering sparks of human life and when these two sparks had flickered and blazed and died down, the two men lay gasping, an arm's reach from each other.

Philip's eyes went to the fire. It was a small fire, burning more brightly as he looked, and he longed to throw himself upon it so that the flames might eat into his flesh. He had mumbled something about police, arrest and murder during the struggle, but DeBar spoke for the first time now.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Friendship is the flower of a moment and the fruit of time.—Kotzebue.